

G[ODDING] (W= W.)

SKETCH

OF

Chas. H. Nichols, M. D., LL. D.

BY  
W. W. G.

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*W. H. Dickey*

## CHARLES HENRY NICHOLS.

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He whose picture forms the frontispiece of the present number of our journal has stood so long in the front rank of American superintendents of institutions for the insane, has been associated with so much of their work in the past, and is still so active in it that to most of our readers he needs no introduction.

We do not purpose here to enter upon a full estimate of his life and services, which despite the fashion of the hour seems to us out of place, except in memoir—may the time for that be far distant!—but rather to give such brief outline of his work and such salient points of his character that those seeing the picture may recognize the man.

Dr. Nichols was born in Maine in 1820. His academic training was in the schools of his native State and at Providence, R. I. His medical education was in the Universities of New York and Pennsylvania, graduating from the medical department of the latter in 1843. His tutorage in



ministering to the insane was under Dr. Amariah Brigham in the State Asylum at Utica, N. Y., where he was chosen medical assistant in 1847. In 1849 he was appointed physician to the Bloomingdale Asylum in New York City, a position he resigned in 1852.

While still a young man in the thirty-second year of his age he was mentioned by Miss Dix and selected by President Fillmore to superintend the construction and take charge of the Government Hospital for the Insane at Washington, D. C. It was a great work, demanding a capable, broad man, every way, and the way that he administered his trust showed that the President had made no mistake in his choice. Men enough can be found to follow, but those with the power to originate are few. In entering upon his duties Dr. Nichols found that the appropriation with which he was expected to purchase a site and complete the hospital was only one hundred and twenty thousand dollars. He took what there was and went to work. He abated not one jot from his high ideal, he curtailed in no respect the fair proportions of that model hospital, which, nowhere laid down in books, but differing from and better than any hitherto known, existed only

in the fertile and comprehensive brain of the young man who then and there went resolutely about building it. There were local prejudices to be overcome, a public sentiment in favor of the hospital to be created, and the insane of the army and navy to be provided for in a manner befitting a nation's largess. Selecting, he purchased a site—in this he had the aid of Miss Dix—of two hundred acres overlooking the Capitol and the Potomac, a site to-day unrivalled by that of any hospital in the United States. Much of the appropriation went that way, but in this he was looking to the end, and he was right. Having his plan displayed on paper, a plan twenty-five years in advance of its time, known as the echelon or receding front, as great an improvement on the linear or Kirkbride plan as that was on the quadrangular. With what remained of the appropriation he began to build, not the centre building, but the extreme wing. Again he was looking to the end and he was right. Organizing and overseeing everything as is his wont, working day and night, eking out the scanty appropriation by making bricks out of the very ground on which the buildings stood, he finished the wing and also found means to con-

struct a well appointed lodge for the colored insane, thereby creating the first distinct provision for that class ever made, a provision so wise that it was afterwards copied in many of the Southern States. Still looking to the end he took the unfinished bath-room of a future ward for his own lodging, opened the hospital to the insane, set himself to care for and to cure them and asked everybody to come and see. Congressmen, wondering at a building finished within the appropriation, came to look. They were State rights members, opposed on principle to the construction of any national work, and therefore prepared to vote against extending the hospital. And the doctor showed them everything, what they had themselves done there for the insane, and what in justice to themselves remained to be done. It was not for himself but for these afflicted ones that he was asking, and in his pleading their cause was glorified. Whoever has heard Dr. Nichols on hospital topics will understand this. And those members believed in him because he had faith in himself and in his work that it was worthy. Going away from that lesson, out of an open window of the upper ward came the clear sweet voice of one of the female inmates singing

the familiar words in opera—

“ Then you’ll remember me.”

Of old was it said that the stars in their courses fought for the right, and this poor girl’s singing went with them to their committee room, enforcing the doctor’s argument, and they voted the appropriation, and the hospital was finished according to the original plan. He had looked to the end to some purpose; an end that justified all his labor of love that built twenty-five of the best years of his life into those hospital walls. He saw his plan reproduced in Australia, in Newfoundland, and in many State institutions. At considerable pecuniary sacrifice to himself he doubled the hospital lands, he extended its accommodations, he kept the institution in everything abreast of the most enlightened curative treatment of the time, so that when after a quarter of a century they called him back to the Bloomingdale asylum, creating the office of medical superintendent for him, he left at St. Elizabeth a hospital of which one might be pardoned for being proud.

At Bloomingdale he has gone on organizing and building and doing for the best interests of

the insane with the same high ideals and the same indomitable zeal that have always characterized his work. It is only what we should expect from our knowledge of the man.

His life has come to deserved honors. He held for a succession of years the position of president of the Association of American Superintendents of Institutions for the Insane, and is an honorary member of the Medico-Psychological Association of Great Britain; has received the honorary degree of Master of Arts from Union College of New York, and that of Doctor of Laws from the Columbia University at Washington. These are but the stamp of that nobility of which his life is the constant exponent, a life generous in its impulses and lofty in its aims. Taking broad and scientific views of everything, he has been singularly free from the jealousy that would detract from the achievements of others, showing a spirit of magnanimity toward his enemies, and for those whom he counts as his friends, and their name is legion, a devotion most loving and loyal for which friendship is no name.

He writes well, and an article now and then from his pen makes us wish he would write more. In the jurisprudence of insanity those who

remember the Mary Harris case do not need to be told how he stands. But his principal work as with all successful superintendents of institutions for the insane has been in the daily hospital routine whose record is silent but for its results. His great work for humanity here has seemed to us in its fidelity and completeness to have been done as that of one realizing the sacred obligation which the possession of great talents implies, and "As ever in the great task-master's eye."

In the Association of Superintendents he ranks in years and wisdom among the elders, but in progressive ideas, in lively interest, in all that makes for the welfare of the insane and in the generous rivalry that forgetting self seeks only the common good, we count him still a young man.

W. W. G.





